

Sometimes to get to the end, you have to meet in the middle

By Neil Abercrombie and John Tanner

Over the last 230 years, most of the important steps we've taken as a nation have demanded more than a degree of cooperation among competing interests, a sense that there was greater benefit to more people by resolving an issue — even if the outcome was not everything that one side or the other wanted — than taking an intractable stand. Of course, the more important the issue, the more difficult it is to convince opposing interests to give at all.

That's certainly the case with the Bush Administration's war in Iraq. Few issues have generated more heat, venom or ironclad certainty from every perspective. But this war should generate strong reaction. More than 3,700 sons, daughters, husbands, wives, fathers and mothers have been killed. Thousands more have suffered horrible injuries. We don't even know how many Iraqis have lost their lives, and refugees are streaming out of the country. All this has come at a staggering financial cost to our nation, approaching \$3 billion a week. We have borrowed so much money to pay for the war that — quite literally— our grandchildren will be paying off the debt.

Earlier this summer, a group of Congressional Democrats set out to draft legislation that might not end the war in one step, but might be the first step.

That step is the Tanner-Abercrombie bill, which would require the Administration, through the Secretary of Defense, to report to Congress within 60 days and every 90 days thereafter on its planning for the redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq. It doesn't set a deadline for the withdrawal of troops, but rather requires the Administration to provide timetables in conjunction with its withdrawal plans. It puts Congress back in its Constitutionally-prescribed oversight role, which has been seen non-existent in the Bush years.

Some Republicans characterize any legislation with troop withdrawal deadlines as surrender to terrorists. Some Democrats characterize any legislation without troop withdrawal deadlines as surrender to the President. We wanted to end the mutual accusations and reach out to Republicans to forge a legislative solution on withdrawal. In July, our bill came before the House Armed Services Committee and was approved 55-2; every Democrat and all but two Republicans.

But then a fault line opened up within the Democratic Caucus and our bipartisan bill fell in. The problem, according to a group of Democratic colleagues, is that the bill is too bipartisan. Republicans would vote for it and thereby get “cover” on the war.

We can't have legislation that Republicans might vote for, they said in effect. We only want legislation they'll vote against. Then we can punish them for voting against it.

Our reply was that the only cover we were interested in is that needed for our fighting forces under fire in Iraq. We had previously passed a bill sponsored by Armed Services Chairman Ike Skelton which incorporates the withdrawal deadlines from the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group. It had passed the House on nearly a straight party vote, 223-201. But that was the end of it. Senate Democrats don't have the required 60 votes to bring the Skelton Bill to the floor, so they won't even get to discuss it, much less vote on it. And even if they did, the President would veto it.

The House can pass bills with troop withdrawal deadlines every hour on the hour for the rest of the year and nothing will happen. The question is: do we want to try to end the war or just score political points?

Their answer was that they would fight any bill that does not contain deadlines for the withdrawal of troops. Any other approach has been denounced; anyone advocating our bill has been threatened with a Primary Election challenge, even if it means losing the Democratic majority.

House leaders evidently decided that the spectacle of a Democratic confrontation on the floor could not be countenanced before the August recess.

Now, six weeks later, we've heard two days of testimony from General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker and not one mind has been changed. People on both sides are just as locked into their positions as they were before, and no significant move toward ending the war in Iraq is in danger of happening.

All of our bill's cosponsors, including several Republicans, signed a letter to the House leadership last week asking that the bill be brought to the floor for debate and a vote. We haven't heard back from them yet.

Our position is clear. The war will not be brought to an end without Democratic-Republican cooperation in Congress. There is no middle ground. Right now, our armed forces in Iraq are trapped. They have done all they can militarily. Congress must act— as one— now.